Home Is Where You Draw Strength and Rest: The Meanings of Home for Houseless Young People

Sean A. Kidd[1] and Josh D. Evans[2]

Abstract

This qualitative study examined the meanings ascribed to the construct "home" by 208 youths defined by mainstream society as "homeless". Youth narratives on the topic of home ranged across a continuum with home as state at one end (i.e., home is a state of mind, comprised of one's friends) and home as place at the other (i.e., home as a physical dwelling). Youths employing the former meanings had typically been on the street for longer periods and identified with counterculture-type ideologies. For youths who defined home as place, home was constructed in direct opposition to street experiences. For both of these groups, control emerged as a central theme in their narratives. The implications of these findings for engaging youth and goal setting regarding exiting the streets are described.

Keywords

home, homeless, homeless youth, street youth

[1]McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario, Canada
[2]Athabasca University, Athabasca, Alberta, Canada

Corresponding Author:
Sean A. Kidd, PhD, CPsych, Centre for Addiction and Mental Health-Schizophrenia Program, 250 College Street, Suite 738, Toronto, Ontario M5T 1R8
Email: sean_kidd@camh.net

We shape our dwellings, and afterwards our dwellings shape us.

<div align="right">Winston Churchill, 1943</div>

"I Guess I Just Said Something Ignorant, Right?"

The credit for this article belongs to a 16-year-old girl that I (Kidd) met at an alternative high school in New York City. In my months there I had seen her around a fair bit. She was one of the few girls who wore the more typically male version of street wear (e.g., baggy pants, big white T-shirt, ball cap) and tended to give me "sizing you up" types of looks when we passed one another. I had assumed that she didn't fit criteria for the study (i.e., lived with her family) because she never volunteered to participate and hadn't been mentioned by a staff person. One afternoon, while I was cramming for a licensure exam between interviews, she came into the office and sat down. She confirmed that I was the "interview guy" and asked to take part in the study, explaining that she had avoided taking part because she didn't like the idea of talking about her life with a stranger. It was an interview that was immediately off to a bad start. I said something about doing research with homeless people. She became cold and distant, sat back, and looked at me with obvious dislike. I immediately stopped: "I guess I just said something ignorant, right?" As is often the case, admitting ignorance broke the ice and she explained that calling her homeless was wrong. Homeless meant a lack of connections and valued place in terms of physical space, in family and in community. She felt that she had a home and had fought extremely hard to find a sense of home. She experienced my calling her homeless as an oppressive kind of action, an action that took something away from her. It was this conversation with her that led me to interrogate my use of the term "homeless" and, shortly thereafter, largely abandon it in all of my interactions with both youth and adult individuals who did not have a con-sistent residence in a house or apartment. In this article I sought to extend this interrogation, inviting others to participate and, given the limitations of my discipline in examining such constructs, have collaborated with a geographer who has likewise had experience working with this group.

Meanings of Home

-A dwelling-place, house, abode; the fixed residence of a family or household; the seat of domestic life and interests; one's own house; the dwelling in which one habitually lives, or which one regards as one's proper abode.

-The place of one's dwelling or nurturing, with the conditions, circumstances, and feelings which naturally and properly attach to it, and are associated with it . . . but it appears also to be connected with the generalized or partly abstract sense, which includes not merely "place" but also "state," and is thus construed like *youth*, *wedlock*, *health*, and other nouns of state.

-A place, region, or state to which one properly belongs, in which one's affections centre, or where one finds refuge, rest, or satisfaction. (Oxford English Dictionary, 2007)

Home is a multidimensional concept (Hollander, 1991; Mallett, 2004) that involves an interaction between something physical/spatial and a place where various personal relationships and social institutions are lived out. Home is construed as a haven, an ideal, a refuge, and a place of retreat that exists almost interchangeably with the concept of family and is closely linked with notions of self-identity (Blunt, 2005). The association of home with a private residence such as a house is itself entrenched within a stratified hierarchy of dwelling types beginning with the rental apartment at the bottom, the privately owned, detached single-family house at the top, and a range of accommodation types in the middle (Veness, 1992). This hierarchy of housing accommodation is in essence a gradient of valued places within the moral imagination, the accommodation types at the bottom being the least able to offer a home and the valorized types at the top being the most homelike and able to provide a sense of "homefulness."

In contrast with predominant Western notions of home being closely tied with physical structures, among nomadic and Indigenous peoples home is more frequently associated with the land and spaces in nature in which camps are set up, with less differentiation from the concept of the "outside" world (Mallett, 2004). Meanings holding less association with physical structure are likewise held among traveling persons. For those who travel extensively or for lengthy periods, home is a point of reference; something one has come from and something one is going toward (Mallett, 2004). For such persons, home can be both a part of the self and a space where the *true* and unique self can be expressed and lived.

Meanings of Homelessness

Examination and definition of the meanings of homelessness typically revolve around representations of the adult homeless individual. In the public imagination, homelessness is typically associated with the absence of fixed, regular, and adequate housing (Snow & Anderson, 1993). It is important to recognize

that this categorization of homelessness is a social construction. It is dependent on culturally idealized understandings of home, ones that presuppose various types of physical structures considered suitable or acceptable as homes (Kearns & Smith, 1994; Veness, 1992). While superficially suggesting a lack of housing, homelessness serves as a point of social and moral reference (Wardough, 1999). In this context, the term "homeless" carries with it a stigmatizing set of beliefs and values (i.e., personal, moral, and social failure) rivaling even the most extreme sources of stigma (e.g., mental illness; Phelan, Link, Moore, & Stueve, 1997). The power of the label is traceable to the centrality of domesticity in western culture and the multiple ways in which conventional definitions of "homelessness" are inhabited by normative definitions of home (Veness, 1993).

A number of ethnographic studies have examined the strategies and tactics used by unhoused adults to establish "alternative domesticities" (Datta, 2005), which serve as modalities for reconstructing meaningful, dignified lives in light of ongoing dislocation and dispossession (Desjarlais, 1997; Hopper, 2003; Rowe & Wolch, 1990; Ruddick, 1996; Snow & Anderson, 1993). These studies have emphasized how the homeless stitch together "homeless identities" (i.e., self-redefinition) through alternative versions of "homemaking," accomplished largely through their tactical use and inhabitation of public spaces, their reliance on social networks and their identification with distinct subcultures (Rowe & Wolch, 1990; Veness, 1993). In establishing these alternative ways of living, the homeless not only challenge mainstream definitions of home as a permanent, fixed residence but urban domesticity and, by extension, urban citizenship more generally (Arnold, 2004).

With this in mind, a small number of studies have examined the alternative meanings of home held by adults without housing (May, 2000; Veness, 1993). These studies have suggested differences from mainstream understandings across two dimensions. One point of departure is the degree to which home with its wider implications (i.e., safety, belonging, family) exists in a more idealistic sense. For persons who may have minimal lived experience of these constructs (e.g., disruptive and abusive childhood and adult contexts), home is more of a theoretical "story" that might be sought after but likely never found (Hill, 1991; May, 2000; Tomas & Dittmar, 1995). The second dimension in which there is divergence is that for homeless persons, particularly those on the streets for longer periods, home becomes embodied to a greater degree with states of mind (e.g., security) relative to physical structure (Hill, 1991; Tomas & Dittmar, 1995; Wardaugh, 1999).

While "homemaking" on the street often serves as a source of self-worth and dignity for the unhoused, it is more often than not viewed as a form of

urban disorder. For the unhoused, private activities of daily life—sleeping, eating, bathing—are often practiced, quite visibly, in public spaces. Commandeering public space for private use is necessary for survival but these private uses often conflict with the dominant meanings associated with public space as a planned and orderly sphere that should be used in legitimate and appropriate ways (e.g., consumption or leisure; Cresswell, 1996).

This conflict between social definition and self-definition, social control and personal meaning is an important dimension of contemporary homelessness in North American cities. In many cities, an ensemble of political, economic, and cultural dynamics have ushered in "revanchist" urban regimes motivated by entrepreneurial interests in downtown regeneration and involving the intensification of social and spatial control measures within downtown public spaces (Smith, 1996; Soja, 2000). Neil Smith's (1996) notion of the "revanchist city" describes the vengeful and punitive attempts at reclaiming and purifying prime spaces in the urban core for the purposes of investment, redevelopment, and consumption. A backlash against the visibly poor and homeless has been documented in these new "entrepreneurial cities," often in the form of measures that aggressively seek to revitalize or "clean up" downtown districts (Mitchell, 2003; Ruddick, 1996). Indeed, on a daily basis street homeless populations confront multiple strategies of surveillance, control, exclusion, and displacement within prime urban spaces (Snow & Mulcahy, 2001). Draconian legal measures, such as homeless resistant urban design, "antiloitering" laws, and "antipandhandling" laws are now the pretext for the containment and removal of "disorderly" populations from prime public spaces (Davis, 1990; Mitchell, 2003).

As the homeless are squeezed out of makeshift encampments and corralled into emergency shelters, they are increasingly confronted with the "home ideal" and their distance from it. A stay in an emergency shelter often confers on the individual the label "homeless" and the associated stigma of social failure. Accepting this label, however, is often a tacit prerequisite for gaining access and receiving assistance.

Meanings of Youth Homelessness

Definitions of youth homelessness are similar to adult homelessness in the conflation of the more easily operationalized status of housing (e.g., McKinney-Vento Act of 2002, definition of a lack of "fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence") and the far broader implications for identity and morality. The one clear distinction between youth and adult conceptualizations of homelessness is the larger degree of heterogeneity of meanings associated

with youth homelessness. This heterogeneity can readily be seen in the way in which "runaway," "homeless," and "street youth" are used almost inter-changeably in descriptions of this group. These labels hold quite different implications with "runaway" implying continued if broken attachment to family and "street youth" situating youths decidedly in the street context. A survey of the research literature and media readily reveals the wide variety of meanings linked to youth homelessness. As a group they've been regarded as delinquents suffering from "mental defect" (Thomas & Gostwyck, 1925), as a product of genetically deficient "foreign" parents (Brown, 1920), and their lives have been understood to be a consequence of mental illness (Gilpin, 1930) and a symptom of mental illness (Jenkins, 1971). They have been viewed in popular media as criminal vagrants (Riot, 1895), adventure-some truants (Four Runaway Boys, 1931), pathetic runaways (LeDuff, 1997), and abused children (Connor, 1982). In most accounts the feared and, in some respects, anticipated courses of many of these young people are miserable lives and early deaths.

> [life that becomes] wilder and more desperate; shame, increasing deg-radation, pride and hopelessness spurring on, and the end, the lonely death of a vagrant in the wards of the penitentiary hospital. (C.L.B., 1854, p. 6)

Contemporary investigation into the lives of these young people suggests that many homeless youths experience little of the security, safety, or comfort associated with the construct of home. Research has indicated that most youth are thrown out of or run from abusive and chaotic family backgrounds to a life away from family characterized by poor mental and physical health, sub-stance use, victimization, and criminality (Baron, 2003; Ensign, 1998; Kidd, 2006; Whitbeck, Hoyt, & Yoder, 1999). While much of the research literature and popular coverage of youth homelessness revolves around portrayals of the high levels of risk, grim lives, and early deaths of these young people, some studies have found tremendous resilience in compliment to extreme risk. These works have found that many youths have developed strong abili-ties to be self-reliant, networks of mutual support, and spirituality (Lindsey, Kurtz, Jarvis, & Nackenrud, 2000; Rew & Horner, 2003; Rew, Taylor-Seehafer, Thomas, & Yockey, 2001). Furthermore, many homeless young people dem-onstrate an ability to adapt to extremely adverse circumstances, constructing new skill sets and values that allow them to survive for years in any number of dangerous contexts (Kidd & Davidson, 2007).

In this article we sought, through examination of the narratives of youths such as the young woman who made the initial challenge, to deepen the dialogue around home and homelessness for these individuals. It was hoped that by understanding better how these constructs relate with the resilience of these youths, it might provide further direction as to how we (the public, policy makers, researchers, service providers) can help them find home be it a state of mind and/or four walls and a ceiling.

Method

One hundred and eight youths in Toronto and 100 in New York City were interviewed in various settings including parks, sidewalks, in diners, and in several youth agencies. Their ages ranged from 14 to 24, with an average age of 20. The participants included 122 males and 84 females, of whom 56% were White, 12% Black, 12% Hispanic, 5% Native, with the remainder of mixed ethnicity. The average age of the youths' first experience of homelessness was 15, with a mean education level of 10.6 years. Most youths (57%) reported having been homeless for more than 2 years with the remainder reporting having been homeless for less than 2 years. Thirty-three percent reported continuous homelessness and 40% reported having had conventional housing 25% of the time. The majority of participants resided in street and/or squat locations (47%), with 26% "couch surfing" (temporarily residing in the homes of others), and 14% having lived in shelters. In terms of income, most reported multiple income sources with panhandling (45%), dealing drugs (23%), a job (23%), and sex trade involvement me (15%) appearing with the most frequency.

The reason for this number of interviews, which might seem excessive for a qualitative study, was the structured survey that was completed by the youths following a conversational interview on resilience and street survival. A structural equation modeling analysis was conducted with the structured survey data to confirm a model of suicide risk that arose in previous qualitative research (Kidd, 2006). Semistructured interviews focused on gathering the resilience narratives of these youths (i.e., resources drawn upon to survive in the street context). At the end of these interviews, all participants were asked "What does home mean to you?" with resulting thoughts and narratives explored in a conversational manner. All interviews were conducted by [first author—name withheld], identified in the first person.

At the agencies in New York and Toronto, I was given office space, with youths referred to me by agency workers and approaching me on their own

volition, having heard about the study from other youth. On the streets, I approached kids that I thought were street involved. Sometimes they *looked* as if this was the case (e.g., sitting on the sidewalk, panhandling, old and worn out clothes etc.), and in other instances I ran into youths I knew from the agency who introduced me to young people who did not necessarily appear homeless. To begin the interview, I started with something general such as "Hi. I am walking around and talking with folks living on the streets about how they get by." After an invitation to continue I would describe the study in more depth and let them know that they would be getting 20 dollars in McDonalds coupons for their time. All aspects of this study were approved by an institutional ethics review board. [for a more detailed description of the interview process used in this study, see Kidd & Davidson, 2007].

Interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed. Qualitative analysis of the narratives of participants was comprised of a content analysis procedure (Smith, 1995) in which (a) common themes/categories were derived through an open coding process (new category created for each new unit of meaning), followed by (b) examination of how themes relate to one another (e.g., hierarchies, processes) in the narratives. The NVivo computer program was used to facilitate the analysis process. After an initial thematic analysis of the original 208 interviews was completed, I did 28 verification interviews. For these interviews I sought out youths with whom I had already spoken and described for them the major themes that had arisen from the larger group of narratives. I then sought their reactions (i.e., whether the theme seemed to fit or not fit with their experience/understanding) and asked them to share their thoughts and elaborate on what I had found. Overall, the participants in these 28 interviews confirmed the themes as they had emerged and are described in this article, with the interviews providing a forum through which participants elaborated on the material presented to them.

Results

The one commonality that came across in the descriptions and stories about home provided by these young people, regardless of their particular thoughts and beliefs, was the observation that most had obviously given serious thought to this topic. For these participants, home seemed to be a valuable currency, possibly as a function of how little of the experience of home had by these young men and women. The importance of the concept of home was evident through intricate, well-thought-out descriptions and through emotional emphasis in the telling of these narratives. It was also explicitly

stated, as was the case with a young woman that I interviewed in a Toronto drop-in center. For her, though her housing situation had been in flux for months with her shifting from the street to a shelter with plans to move into a transitional housing program, the value she gave the meaning of home was well-defined:

> Home means so much to me now. Trust me, I used to be out in this winter 24 hours a day, on the street trying to make money. I never had a regular place to go. I would go three days without sleep . . . it means so much.

While there was broad common ground in emphasis, the participants' narratives diverged in meaning. This divergence, paralleling the dimensionality of the home construct, emerged as two major themes. Meanings associated with home as place are presented first followed by the broader definition of home that incorporated state of mind and relationships.

Home Is a Place of Your Own, That No One Can Take Away From You

Several interrelated themes ran across participants' descriptions of home as a place, with most youths speaking of it in a theoretical sense; as something they had never personally experienced. The theme of control was predominant, including control over access to their home, control over what takes place in the home, control in the sense of stability of residence, and a sense of ownership and privacy. For some this included family, though family seldom included current biological family members and home was seldom described as their parents' homes. This theme seemed to have a particular emphasis among youths living in shelters and with the attendant rules and limitations to privacy. The descriptions of a young man and woman whom I interviewed in the alternative high school in New York City touched on this theme of control. For both, this desire for control carried an undertone of frustration with the experiences they had with family and in residential youth services.

> A place of my own. That's home. It's not my mom's place. It's not the shelter. It is my own place, wherever that may be when I get it together. That's home. It would be mine. Not anybody else's. Nobody else's rules. It is mine. It is my little haven. It is my home.

I want to . . . have a home. Not a house, a home. Home means resting . . . sleeping. It is someplace where you know that's yours and you are the head of your household. Home is what you work hard for. You got family, you got your kids there. Y'all do things together. Y'all wake up. Y'all eat. Y'all sleep. You do everything together and that is home. They say "There is no place like your own home." You got your own home, and you can't tell me what to do in my house. You can take off all of your clothes and walk around with no problem. Nobody can tell you nothing. And you know why? Because you earned that. You did your best to get your home and if that is what you want to do you can do it."

Home also included a sense of identity in that it can be an expression of one's self, a starting point from which a more valued existence might be built, and a means through which mainstream culture and resources might be accessed. For one young woman living in a shelter, who was holding her first regular job and struggling to build an existence and sense of self that was separate from drug use and sex trade involvement, *identity* could only be found through home.

A home is a place where you can go and take care of yourself. Whether that means taking a break from society and just sitting by yourself and meditating and relaxing and not having to be with people. Taking care of yourself physically. You can take a shower. You can cook for yourself. A home is a place that you can feel safe and secure and know that you are okay in the place where you are at. A home should be an indication of who you are. It should represent you and yourself. When you don't have a home, you really don't have an identity, because you don't have anything that represents yourself and you can't take care of yourself.

Very few youths spoke of the physical characteristics of home. In many of the narratives on the topic of home, the contrast with life on the streets was provided. As much as home *was*, these descriptions were built on what home *was not*. They spoke of how, in contrast to home, the street environment is constantly uncomfortable, unpredictable, unsafe, a place where they are not accepted or welcomed by people, and where they could be thrown out of wherever they were at any time. Participants stated that by not having a home they were forced into actions and situations that did not fit with their sense of self and aspects of themselves that they valued. In contrast, in their descriptions of home, they emphasized the idea of a place where they could feel comfortable, at ease, a sense of belonging, and relaxed. One young man

I spoke to who had been living outside all winter, mostly under a walkway in front of Toronto City Hall, commented:

> A place for me to put my head and unload. Walk in the door, throw down my boots and my coat . . . lay down on my bed and just relax. Veg out. If I'm on the streets, I have to go and find a place, and worry about being woken up by the police . . . if somebody is going to steal from me at night. Home is somewhere you can keep your stuff . . . go have a shower and have your privacy without tons of people around.

For these participants, a home was a place from which they could build a valued life, and something of which they could be proud. Coming out in these stories about home was a sense of an intense longing for and valuing of people, situations, and environments that can't be found on the streets. Home was both difficult to obtain and something one must work hard to maintain. For one young woman that I spoke with in a youth agency in New York, the concept of home aligned with many of her major life goals—embodying a sense of control, safety and responsibility. For her, homelessness expanded beyond her life on the streets to include being isolated and locked in an apartment where she was raped repeatedly.

> Home is where the heart is [said sarcastically, laughs]. Home is definitely not living in a shelter. And home is not living in a place where you are uncomfortable. Like, when I was telling you about the abusive boyfriend and when I was living with him for six months . . . . Even though I wasn't living in a shelter that wasn't a home. I didn't contribute to that. I was abused know what I mean? Home is finding a place where you are comfortable. Even co-op housing, that might not be your own but it's a step up. It's a step closer to learning how to have a home. I have to . . . . Having a home is work. It isn't as easy as "home is where the heart is". You need to be able to maintain. Just a place where you can go and you can know that you are comfortable and that this is yours. [It's interesting what you say about how you have to work to make a home.] You have to maintain you know? Whether it's learning how to get up every day and leaving your home to go to where it's going to support that home.

"Dude, Home Is Where Me and Her
Can Sit All Day and Fall Asleep"

Other participants implicitly and explicitly separated their understanding of home from fixed physical structures. While many different types of youths

engaged in such descriptions, it tended to be more prevalent among those who had been on the streets for several years or who were members of groups with overt counterculture ideologies (e.g., punk, train hopper, crusty). I heard these narratives most often in street interviews with kids who were camping out in parks or living in squats. Control emerged in these narratives as well. In this context, however, it was an assertion of control against mainstream pressures and stigmatization rather than control over negative aspects of the street context as was described above. This theme was typified in the description of a youth that I interviewed in Tompkins Square Park. He and his girlfriend were dressed in worn army surplus clothing with large, battered backpacks propped up against the tree behind them. Both had been living outside for several years:

> Everybody thinks home is like some big nice place with a picket fence. Dude, home is where me and her can sit all day and fall asleep. This park is like half home to an extent. You got little things that go on, but this park is like home. Everyone here knows my name. Like here, everyone knows I am . . . . I've been around here for years and everybody knows me. And this is comfort. I come into the park and everybody gives me love . . . a hug . . . they see her with me and they know her because they know me. And they show her all that love. She never had any friends, and I never had too many. But I've always been charismatic like my dad, and that's what gets us by out here. The way you talk to people and the way you move. This is definitely home. Maybe not physically the park, but this environment is home. It is the environment where you can let your hair down and let all those defenses drop . . . like if somebody gets McDonald's and everyone takes a bite and passes it down for the rest. That is fucking home dude. Because you don't find that with most of the population. We live together, eat together, and fight together. When all of civilization has fallen down, it's the rats and the roaches who will still be around. And we are the rats and roaches. All you motherfuckers sitting up there with the silver spoon, you are not going to know how to feed yourselves. Meanwhile we are going to be roving around in bands and you will be eaten. That's home. That's family. And half of us don't know each other's real fucking birth names. Home is where she is comfortable, and where she is talkative and active and happy and falling asleep. She is home. It's wherever we go. I never believed that shit when I was younger, but now the younger kids coming out here are coming up to me and asking me for advice. And I am young. It's just the way that I presented myself out here from the start.

Home for those such as the couple above, was defined by people who care and take care of one another with friends often described as family. This aspect of home was described by a range of young people. Some had spent little time on the streets, such as one teenager who had been living for months in a New York shelter while attending high school:

> Home is not some place where you live. Home is the place where you feel accepted. A place where you feel you belong. NYC itself is a place that I consider my home. It's a place where I come and I feel like people understand me. It's familiarity. It's a feeling you get. Anywhere else doesn't do it. Where I grew up wasn't home. It is like you ask me what the word family is. Family is not who you grew up with, family is people who care about you no matter what.

And a man, at the top of the age criteria of 24 in full punk regalia who had been living outside for many years described home as follows:

> Oh. Well, this is my home. Like I said, that is why I came back here. I'm not homeless. I got a beautiful woman. I got friends. I got family. I'm not homeless. I'm houseless. When her and I lay together that's home. When I call my nephews and hear their voices, that's home. I'm houseless. I don't have a bed. Sounds like a bad cliché or something but home is a state of mind.

Rather than a house, home was something that traveled with them and that they created wherever they happened to be. It was a state of mind and not a place. When home was described as a place it was conceived of broadly, in terms of the city or the earth. Sometimes this transformed and broadened notion of home was presented in opposition to the perceived hypocrisy of mainstream-defined "homes" that were abusive and uncaring with a truer sense of comfort and belongingness being available on the streets. Many of the qualities that other youths ascribed to home in reference to a house, these youths spoke of as something they had found on the streets. As one girl, who was camping out with a large group of youths under a railway overpass in Toronto put it,

> Home is where you are together. That is home. It is not a place where you crash. It is a place where you are together with friends. That is what home is. When they say homeless, they mean buildingless. Homeless just means you are separate, with nobody to relate to.

A tone of empowerment came across in these descriptions. For some it emerged as a means of reclaiming of the idea of home that other people had tried to take away from them by calling them homeless. As they construct these meanings they are not homeless, despite the fact that youths taking this stance tended to have been on the street for the longest periods of time. They are houseless. In a drop-in, a young Native man who had been living in a sleeping bag in a stadium stairwell that winter made a link between his beliefs about home with those of his culture stated,

> To me, a home is where you lay your head. If has a roof over it . . . it doesn't matter if it doesn't have a door. It's where you lay your head. That's what you call home. And for my people, my Native people, home used to be the forest. That's what they called home. They didn't have no fucking houses or shelters, they just lived in what they had. That's basically what I do. Wherever I lay is my home. Any person that says any different is fucked.

Another young man, a train hopper who was making money for food by playing a flute made out of a length of copper pipe, said he had given the concept of home a lot of thought. He described himself as a loner, seldom traveling with other youth, and said that he had been on the road across Europe, the United States, and Canada for the past 2 years:

> I tend to try to clarify that every once in a while. They call it homelessness but I guess also this is part of my definition . . . maybe not changing but realizing or acknowledging something. But, home, basically is the earth. Everyone says homelessness; I kind of have to make fun of people and their concept of home. It is shelter basically. Modern man traps himself in his home. You live in your shelter and there is no more outside world. It is just a scary place between work and home.

Some, though, wavered on this position and suggested that ideas about home change over time and that while the streets might seem like home they were fooling themselves into thinking that or otherwise attempting to reduce distress by reconciling themselves to their circumstances. One girl that I spoke with typified those who seemed at a midway point in their understanding of home. She was quite young, and though she said she was 16 (as almost all of those likely under 16 do) I suspected that she was more likely about 14. She was dressed completely in black with a backpack covered in buttons proclaiming anarchy, the names of punk bands, and girl power.

To me, home right now is down under the bridge. Because all of my stuff is down there. We got our bed. Me and my boyfriend . . . other squat mates. We've been there so long. I still say that my parent's house is home. I haven't slept there since I was out here . . . but it is weird going in there because it is home . . . all my stuff's still there but, I'm not. It's so different now. I will go into the house and my parents make me take off all my stuff because they don't want everything getting dirty. Like I smell or something."

Discussion

Two of the themes found in the present study had been described in the adult homelessness literature. These themes included youths' descriptions of how constructs of home exist largely in an idealistic sense due to a lack of lived experience in positive environments that align with mainstream meanings (Hill, 1991; May, 2000; Tomas & Dittmar, 1995). The other theme that resonated with the descriptions of adults was the degree of divergence from home as a physical structure and, particularly for those on the streets for longer periods, home experienced as a largely internalized construct (i.e., state of mind, emotions; Hill, 1991; Tomas & Dittmar, 1995; Wardaugh, 1999). The narratives of the participants of this study, however, included several additional elements running across a dimension ranging from home more closely associated with place and home associated with a state of mind.

The Preservation of Home

For youths who associated home with place (i.e., conceptualize home as including a physical structure), home was defined largely in contrast with experiences common to street environments. A critical element forming this contrast and placement of the meanings of home, was control. Homelessness is characterized in many ways by a lack of control in domains valued by most Western individuals. These include a lack of control over the events, social and otherwise, that involve one's self, over key elements of the course of one's life (e.g., work, place of residence), and a lack of control over one's property. In contrast, for these youths, home was associated with a sense of control within a living environment including behaviors, privacy, persons associated with, safety, and a sense of ownership. While several of these meanings are commonly associated with home by most persons (Hollander, 1991; Mallett, 2004), they are more sharply defined and strongly sought after by these youths who lack such control in many ways. Other elements, likewise described in

contrast with street environments, included the manner in which home can be a forum through which an individual's unique identity could be expressed and a place of belonging, social and otherwise. Homeless youths often describe frustration with the one-dimensional manner in which they are portrayed through stigmatizing labels and associations and likewise describe intense loneliness and isolation as a function of their circumstances (Kidd, 2004). Finally, for many youths home was associated with a foundation from which one could begin to build a nonstreet existence and serve as a point of access to mainstream life. To have a home would not only provide comfort and safety, but also would be a source of self-respect. Aside from the obvious benefits to health and safety that can be obtained through adequate housing, it is notable that domains such as self-esteem and loneliness are crucial determinants of suicidality among this group (Kidd, 2006).

For this group, idealized place-based meanings of home functioned as an internal *measure* of their lack or incompleteness as street youth. It served as a horizon of meaning on which their "outsider" status was perceptible to self and others. Our findings suggest that the pervasive lack of control conveyed by this group is in part connected to the experiential distance between their everyday circumstances and their own internalized understandings of what a home means and the social value attached to having one. This group tended to be populated by street youth who were still early in their "homeless careers" and had perhaps not yet established the necessary street relationships and alternative worldviews that would otherwise provide feelings of security and safety. Undoubtedly, feelings of insecurity and precariousness are only intensified under "revanchist" urban conditions that reinforce their marginal status. For street youth, the tightening grip of local ordinances governing public space coupled with the institutional "rhythms" (e.g., hours of operation) of shelters and other key services provide little control over key elements of life such as eating, sleeping, or bathing, further reinforcing the awareness of their distance from the norm and their marginal status. Such legislated restrictions are immediately relevant to the two settings examined in this study. In both New York (Smith, 1996) and Toronto (Keil, 2002), authorities have applied a plethora of punitive measures and policies to purge downtown public spaces of "disorderly bodies" in an effort to attract reinvestment, redevelopment and encourage regeneration and gentrification. While social control strategies have arguably always been a feature of urban environments, it is widely recognized that current urban regimes are particularly harsh on the visibly poor and homeless (Mitchell, 2003). This new urban context has particular consequences for

the ability of people on the margins, in our case youth, to establish "alternative domesticities."

The Subversion of Home

At the other end of the spectrum were youths whose meanings of home revolved primarily or entirely around state. It was a subversive orientation that directly challenged the home ideal. For these youths, similar to travelers and nomadic cultures (Mallett, 2004), home was not associated with a unitary physical structure. Having a sense of home led to similar experiences of comfort, safety, and belonging and a central theme of control emerged. These narratives, however, markedly diverged from place-associated meanings of home in several ways. For these young people, the theme of control involved reconstructing dominant meanings of home-as-place and reconceptualizing home as being a state of mind, of being comprised of their friends (often described as family), and as being linked to broad and loosely defined geographical spaces such as "city" or "world". Many of these youths stated that they resented the disempowering and stigmatizing connotations of the label "homeless" and conceptualized their redefinition as a form of political/cultural resistance. In justifying this stance, youths would call attention to hypocrisy, fears, and ignorance that they perceived in mainstream meanings of home and nuclear family. Youths who took this stance were more often those who had been on the streets for longer periods and/or ascribed to countercultural ideologies (e.g., punk and train hopper subcultures).

The refashioned meaning of home, for this second group, functioned as a *measure* of their "insider" status within an alternative community, a community that, by admonishing the idealization of home, is able to free itself from the "pressure" of the stigmatizing mark of "homelessness." This group was populated by members who had prolonged experiences on the street or established "homeless careers." Rebuking notions of home as a house or physical structure is a subversive, countercultural act. The survival strategies that these orientations legitimate are no less subversive. Home as a "state of mind" was largely reflective of adaptive strategies that were embedded in the mobile and fluid social networks (or "street family") that had displaced conventional understandings of home as a source of security, sanctuary, and belonging. In the experiences examined here, these adaptive strategies and their underlying subversive ideologies were seemingly emboldened by aggressive urban strategies employed to purify public space of disorder.

Reconstruction

As conceptualized in Mead's Symbolic Interactionism (1934), youths at both ends of the spectrum described above have experienced conflicts that require some form of reconstruction related to understandings of homelessness. Both groups emphasize self-reconstruction, arguably a route more accessible to disempowered groups than social reconstruction, in their responses. For some, their self-reconstruction involved finding/creating home as place through which they might remove themselves from the many aspects of homelessness that they experience as being contrary to the manner of life and identities that they value. For others, self-reconstruction involves rejecting dominant meanings of home and homelessness and their attendant value structures and constructing meanings of home as state. These youths feel empowered through their effort to sidestep the negative social and self evaluations associated with the term homelessness. The public can no longer take "home" away from them by calling them homeless. That this route might be more readily accessed by youths longer on the streets and those with countercultural values could alternately be explained by repeated lack of success in accessing mainstream meanings and structures associated with home over time and the ability to more readily take a critical view on mainstream narratives and values. Indeed, it is possible that with greater time on the streets youths might move from one end of the dimension to another. Youths might potentially move back again as they contemplate exiting the streets after a lengthy period, as was indicated by some narratives in which youths described taking a critical view of their earlier efforts to deconstruct mainstream meanings of home.

There are several potential consequences to the modes of self-reconstruction described above. As has been addressed previously in work examining shifts in identity and value systems among homeless youth (Kidd & Davidson, 2007), such meaning reconstructions are a double-edged sword for homeless youths. Adapting values and meanings in a manner that breaks from mainstream values (i.e., adopting street subcultures) can lead to less distress regarding being on the streets, improved ability to survive on the streets, and greater difficulty exiting the streets. Conversely, holding on to mainstream values can lead to greater distress on the streets and decrease the individual's ability to successfully survive, but can provide greater motivation to exit the streets. With respect to the opinion of the public and, as a corollary, assistance through public/private organizations and structures, it is likely the case that perception of youths who overtly reject mainstream values leads to more negative judgment, greater criminalization, and less assistance. This would be consistent with findings of greater stigmatization of those whose sources of stigma are

perceived to be personal choice rather than adverse circumstance (Crocker & Major, 1989).

This study would appear to have three major implications for intervention and action. First, with respect to the design of street outreach services for young people, these findings emphasize the need for a continuum of service models and settings that are sensitive to the diverse ways street youth interpret and employ meanings of home. Service planning should consider programmatic elements that affect user's sense of control and autonomy and that could consequently present barriers to utilization. Second, with respect to individual intervention, this study would suggest that asking youths to provide their description of home is an important question. Embedded, in most instances, with many layers of meaning, responses can help elucidate youths' values and priorities regarding leaving the streets. This would aid in person-centered planning and goal setting and allow workers to intervene more effectively within the individual youth's value system. In some instances (e.g., home as state youths), working towards healthier street existences through strategies such as harm reduction might prove more effective than erroneously assuming that youths define home as housing (with related motivation). The third major implication involves the need for larger society (including policy makers, public media, and researchers) to more carefully examine the use of terms such as "homeless". History is replete with examples of the use of terms believed by the powerful to be terms of convenience and experienced by the labeled to be conflict-laden and stigmatizing.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

Funding

References

Arnold, K. (2004). *Homelessness, citizenship and identity: The uncanniness of late modernity*. New York: State University of New York Press.

Baron, S. W. (2003). Self-control, social consequences, and criminal behavior: Street youth and the general theory of crime. *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency, 40*, 403-425.

Blunt, A. (2005). Cultural geography: Cultural geographies of home. *Progress in Human Geography, 29,* 505-515.

Brown, S. (1920). Social and medical aspects of childhood delinquency. *Journal of the American Medical Academy, 75*, 987-990.

C.L.B. (1854, May 4). Walks among the New York poor. *New York Times,* p. 6.

Churchill, W. (October 28, 1943). House of Commons Speech. Ref. C403.

Connor, T. (1982, January 3). Problem of runaway and homeless youth increases. *New York Times,* p. CN2.

Cresswell, T. (1996). *In place/out of place: Geography, ideology and transgression*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press

Crocker, J., & Major, B. (1989). Social stigma and self-esteem: The self-protective properties of stigma. *Psychological Review, 1996,* 608-630.

Datta, A. (2005). "Homed" in Arizona: The architecture of emergency shelters. *Urban Geography, 26,* 536-557.

Davis, M. (1990). *City of quartz: Excavating the future in Los Angeles*. New York: Verso.

Desjarlais, R. R. (1997). *Shelter blues: Sanity and selfhood among the homeless*. Pennsylvania: Penn Press.

Ensign, J. (1998). Health issues of homeless youth. *Journal of Social Distress and the Homeless, 7,* 159-174.

Four runaway boys are found in Harlem. (1931, October 11). *New York Times,* p. N3.

Gilpin, F. (1930). The runaway child: A case study. *Journal of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences, 149*, 47-57.

Hill, R. P. (1991). Homeless women, special possessions, and the meaning of "home": An ethnographic case study. *Journal of Consumer Research, 18,* 298-310.

Hollander, J. (1991). The idea of home: A kind of space. *Social Research, 58,* 31-49.

Hopper, K. (2003). *Reckoning with homelessness*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Jenkins, R. L. (1971). The runaway reaction. *American Journal of Psychiatry, 128,* 168-173.

Kearns, R., & Smith, C. (1994). Housing, homelessness, and mental health: Mapping an agenda for geographical inquiry. *Professional Geographer, 46,* 418-424.

Keil, R. (2002). Common sense neoliberalism: Progressive conservative urbanism in Toronto, Canada. *Antipode, 34*, 578-601.

Kidd, S. A. (2004). "The walls were closing in and we were trapped": A qualitative analysis of street youth suicide. *Youth and Society, 36,* 30-55.

Kidd, S. A. (2006). Factors precipitating suicidality among homeless youth: A quantitative follow-up. *Youth & Society, 37,* 393-422.

Kidd, S. A., & Davidson, L. (2007). "You have to adapt because you have no other choice." The stories of strength and resilience of 208 homeless youth in New York City and Toronto. *Journal of Community Psychology, 35,* 219-238.

LeDuff, C. (1997, September 21). *New York Times,* CY3.

Lindsay, E. W., Kurtz, D., Jarvis, S., Williams, N. R., & Nackerud, L. (2000). How runaways and homeless youth navigate troubled waters: Personal strengths and resources. *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal, 17,* 115-140.

Mallett, S. (2004). Understanding home: A critical review of the literature. *Sociological Review, 52*, 62-89.

May, J. (2000). Of nomads and vagrants: Single homelessness and narratives of home as place. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space, 18,* 737-756.

McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act. (Re-authorized, January, 2002) 42 U.S.C. §§11431-11436, Sec. 725.

Mead, G. H. (1934). *Mind, self, and society.* Chicago: University of Chicago.

Mitchell, D. (2003). *The right to the city: Social justice and the fight for public space*. New York: Guilford Press.

Oxford English Dictionary. (2007). Retrieved August 20, 2007, from http://www .askoxford.com

Phelan, J., Link, B. J., Moore, R. E., & Stueve, A. (1997). The stigma of homelessness: The impact of the label. *Social Psychology Quarterly, 60,* 323-337.

Rew, L., & Horner, S. D. (2003). Personal strengths of homeless adolescents living in a high-risk environment. *Advances in Nursing Science, 26,* 90-101.

Rew, L., Taylor-Seehafer, M., Thomas, N. Y., & Yockey, R. D. (2001). Correlates of resilience in homeless adolescents. *Journal of Nursing Scholarship, 33,* 33-40.

Riot in truant home. (1895, May 24). *New York Times,* p. 8.

Rowe, S., & Wolch, J. (1990). Social networks in time and space: Homeless women in skid row, Los Angeles. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers, 80,* 184-204.

Ruddick, S. (1996). *Young and homeless in Hollywood: Mapping the social imaginary*. New York: Routledge.

Shaw, M., & Dorling, D. (1998). Mortality among street youth in the UK. *Lancet, 352,* 743.

Smith, J. A. (1995). Semi-structured interviewing and qualitative analysis. In J. A. Smith, R. Harre, & L. V. Langenhove (Eds.), *Rethinking methods in psychology.* (pp. 9-26). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Smith, N. (1996). *The new urban frontier: Gentrification and the revanchist city*. New York: Routledge.

Snow, D. A., & Anderson, L. (1993). *Down on their luck: A study of homeless street people*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Snow, D., & Mulcahy, M. (2001). Space, politics and the survival strategies of the homeless. *American Behaviouralist Scientist, 45*, 149-169

Soja, E. (2000). *Postmetropolis: Critical studies of cities and regions*. Los Angeles: Blackwell.

Thomas, W. R., & Gostwyck, C. H. G. (1925). Observations on delinquent mental defectives. *Journal of Mental Science, 71,* 41-47.

Tomas, A., & Dittmar, H. (1995). The experience of homeless women: An exploration of housing histories and the meaning of home. *Housing Studies, 10*, 493-515.

Veness, A. R. (1992). Home and homelessness in the United States: Changing ideas and realities. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space, 10*, 445-468.

Veness, A. R. (1993). Neither homed nor homeless: Contested definitions and the personal worlds of the poor. *Political Geography, 12*, 319-340.

Wardaugh, J. (1999). The unaccommodated woman: Home, homelessness and identity. *Sociological Review, 47*, 91-109.

Whitbeck, L. B., Hoyt, D. R., & Yoder, K. A. (1999). A risk-amplification model of victimization and depressive symptoms among runaway and homeless adolescents. *American Journal of Community Psychology, 27*, 273-296.

Bios

Sean A. Kidd is an assistant professor with the McMaster University Department of Psychiatry and Behavioural Neurosciences, an assistant clinical professor with the Yale Department of Psychiatry, and is the staff psychologist with St. Joseph's Healthcare, Hamilton, Mental Health Rehabilitation Services. His primary area of research interest lies in the examination of risk and resilience among marginalized persons. Much of his work to date has focused on suicidality, resilience, and intervention development among homeless youth. He has also done work in areas including the development of community-based programs of recovery for persons with serious mental illness, adolescent suicidality, cultural psychology, and the integration of qualitative methods within psychology.

Joshua D. Evans teaches human geography in the Centre for Global and Social Analysis, Athabasca University. In addition to his research on homelessness and housing he is currently examining the role of interurban policy learning networks in the transfer of poverty reduction strategies across Canada.